

## THE FOLKTALE AS "TRUE" EXPERIENCE NARRATIVE

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Observing the dynamics of taletelling among the Fanti of the Akan ethnic group of Ghana, I have often been struck by the high degree of concentration and emotional involvement brought to bear on the performance by both the teller and his audience. The teller sets the mood, prefacing his folktale with an abstract that summarises the point of the story, as Labov has characterised narratives of personal experience (Labov 1972:362-64). The narrator sets the plot in a locale and names his characters, and in the drama that unfolds, the performer's preoccupation is to defend his credibility by vividly reliving a true event in front of his audience. For the story is a rhetorical device, and like an experience narrative, has been selected from the teller's repertoire to deal with the situation at hand (Stahl 1977:9).

The co-operation of the audience is indispensable here. Even though they may interject remarks during the narration, any extraneous noise or murmuring that obtrudes upon the performance is denounced with the formula, "The folktale forbids prattle" (*Anansesem kyiri kasa*). The object of this formula is to discourage all side transactions on the scene of performance that could diffuse the concentration of the participants.

Unlike the personal experience narrator, however, the tale-teller is not narrating in the first person. He is telling a third person narrative in which he was an observer, not a protagonist. The narrator was an eyewitness to the event, and the audience is anxious to hear his eyewitness account. It is the narrator who has seen it and like the storytellers among the Haya of Tanzania, he has the responsibility to re-enact or "see" the event so that the audience may see (Seitel 1980).

The pattern of taletelling differs from that of conversation, yet during the performance the tale-teller and his audience seem to comply with the co-operative principle, which governs all conversational discourse (Grice 1975). In taletelling, the co-operation between the teller

and his audience partially consists of an unspoken agreement to sustain the frame in which the performance is encapsulated (Goffman 1974, Bauman 1977). The frame here is **play**, and it enjoins the listener to suppose that he is witnessing the re-enactment of an event the narrator has actually seen. The frame establishing the play element is announced through an opening formula, "The tale is not meant to be believed" (**kodzi wongye ndzi**). This formula elicits the following reply from the audience, "It is meant to be kept (and passed on)" (**wogyie sie**). This response from the audience is an indication of their readiness to co-operate. After this keying, the challenge of the performance lies in the ability of the teller and his audience to create and sustain a facade of realism in the interaction without breaking the frame. Each participant thus lends his co-operation, and sympathetically participates in life in the unreal world.

To the analyst, the task is to examine the playing-out of realism against a background of fiction. Elements of fantasy are bound to be revealed as the story unfolds, but how skillful are the narrator and his audience in manipulating the delicate tension between fantasy and reality? In this paper, I hope to explore the use of linguistic, literary and dramatic devices to lend realism in a folktale performance, using as an example a specific tale performance in Fanti (Akan).

The tale at issue was performed by Owusu of Gomua Afransi in Southern Ghana, before an audience of ten including the present writer. In translating this event into print, I have, of course, moved three generations from the original story-telling event--first putting it into print, then translating it from Akan to English. All is not lost, however, for this is not a synopsis, but an attempt to recapture, albeit infelicitously, the story as it was told. I have been as literal as possible in my translation, sometimes at the risk of sounding absurd in English.

#### Why the Crab is Full of Fat

I am going to tell you why the inside of the crab is fatty. A certain man and his wife, and they went to stay in a village and they got a daughter; and they were there and disease struck the mother, and the resulting

sound was **pu**, and she died. This brought sadness to the house. The man and his daughter, they were there and disease struck the father and he also died.

(This one), now, the daughter was alone. It happened that the child set out to look for somebody to stay with. As she was walking she came upon a village, and shouted "This silent town, is it void of human beings?" She heard a response "Come on, it is occupied by human beings." When she went, she met a very old lady in the house who asked "What's the trouble?"

"Nana," said the girl, "I was staying with my mother and father, and they both died and left me alone; so please stay with me." The old woman said "it's good news." And it happened that the old woman entered her room and brought out two small plantains and asked the girl to cook these on fire for meals. She obeyed, and the old lady gave her condiments to add to that, 'fine.' When food was ready, the old woman said to her, "Guess my name before we eat." The girl said, "you are called Nana." She answered, "No, two more chances." She said, "you are called Very Very Old Lady." The old lady said, "No, one more chance." The girl said, "You are called Home-Ridden Old Lady." She said no, and the old lady, she went very high up and plunged her buttocks down into the food, the resulting sound was **paya** [The narrator jumped high to demonstrate the old lady's jump.] Oh! and she went high up again and at one stroke, dashed for the meat, the resulting sound was **hwam**. And now, the lady went to look for one very very very sma-a-all plantain, and gave to the child to roast and eat; for she, the old lady, would sleep like that [that is, go on an empty stomach].

In the evening, she has given her cassava to cook **fufu** paste, and also meat. Immediately the food was ready, the old woman said, "Guess my name before we eat." The girl said, "You must be Nana, the-old-lady." She replied, "No, two more times." She said, "You are called Very-Very-Old-Lady-Staying-At-Home." She replied, "No, one more time." The girl said, "You are called mother." She said No. And she went very high up, and dashed for the **fufu** meal, the resulting sound was **hwom!!!** And she flew high up and snatched the soup with her buttocks; the resulting sound was **hwerere!!!** And she went high up and picked up the meat with her buttocks, the resulting sound being **hwam!!!** And it happened that, after that, she went and took one small plantain and gave it to the girl to cook. And forgetfulness is normal in story telling. There is a river at the outskirts; whenever the girl goes to fetch water from the river, she is asked by Crab, "Why are you always crying whenever you come here to fetch

water?" She replied, "A certain old woman I am staying with, whenever I cook, she asks me to guess her name. When I am unable, she flies up and dashes to eat all the food." Crab said, "That lady, I will tell you her name. She is called Akofosombo." And it happened that when the girl was going home with her water, she saw a ripe pawpaw. "Well-ripened pawpaw, well-ripened pawpaw, well-ripened pawpaw," she said. Oh! When she finished cooking her fufu meal, the old lady said, "Guess my name before we eat." She said, "You are called Well-ripened pawpaw." She said no, two more times. She said, "You are called Grandmother." She said one more chance. The girl said, "Your name is Mother." Oh, and she went very high up and dashed for the soup, the sound was **hwererere!!!** And she soared high up again and with her buttocks snatched the meat, the resulting sound was **hwam!!!** And the girl went to sleep on an empty stomach.

(A listener interrupts the narration: "Hold your story," he tells the narrator, and begins a song; the audience joins in:

Alas! alas! alas!

I am treating my sore with hot water

Alas! alas! alas!

I am treating my sore with hot water.

Narrator continues:)

Alas! alas! is over now---and in the evening, the girl was going to fetch water again. Crab asked her, "When you went home, did you remember the name I pronounced to you?" She said, "When I went I forgot." The crab said, "Come, come, and he detached one of his big claws to pinch the girl's hand, the resulting sound was **dwee!!** "Yes, Akofosombo is the name," said the girl. Oh! and she saw a very ripe pepper fruit, and began saying, "A very ripe pepper fruit, a very ripe pepper fruit." Oh! and the crab bit her, **dwee** was the sound. And she remembered and kept repeating, "Akofosombo, Akofosombo, Akofosombo." And as the girl was cooking, she kept whispering, "Akofosombo, Akofosombo," and the old lady would ask her, "What are you saying," and she would say, "I am only singing." Akofosombo, Akofosombo. That way she cooked the **fufu** meal and the old lady thinking the girl would not know her name, asked her to pronounce her name before they ate. And the girl said, "Isn't it you they call Akofosombo." "Oh God," said the old woman, "Whoever mentioned my name to you at the riverside, you will point him out. Let's go, I will cover the food and we go together." Oh, and the old woman put a lid on the food, and fetched her walking stick--**kur kur kur** was the sound as she walked with it, the girl ahead of her.

As they went, the first animal they met was **Ankaba** fish. "Is it you who mentioned my name to the child?" The fish replied with a song (audience joins the chorus).

The crocodile is increasing in growth, crocodile  
Akofosombo, the crocodile is increasing in growth  
The crocodile, Akofosombo

The crocodile is increasing in growth, crocodile.

Oh and they passed by **Ankaba** the fish, and met shrimp. Shrimp told her in song,

The crocodile is increasing in growth, crocodile  
Akofosombo, Crocodile is increasing in growth Croco-  
dile.

And it happened that they by-passed shrimp, and I won't prolong the story to prolong the journey--and they met Crab himself. And the old woman asked Crab, "Did you tell my name to the child?" And Crab raised a song in reply.

The crocodile is increasing in growth, crocodile  
Akofosombo, Crocodile is increasing in growth, Croco-  
dile.

Oh! Crab has finished singing and is going back to his hole, oh! and the old lady raised her stick and struck him--the sound of striking was **kur**. She picked him up and opened him up, and blew mucus into the crab, the sound of the landing mucus was **tam**. It is this today, that's why whenever we open up the crab we say the crab is full of fat, the crab is full of fat--it's the old lady's mucus. The audience begins singing,

The crocodile is increasing in growth, crocodile  
Akofosombo, Crocodile is increasing in growth.

We sat in a semi-circular position that day. The narrator referred to himself as "Mr. Owusu," and stood in front of us. The previous narrator had told the audience "How divorce came to Ghana" in a story frame. Most of the stories in that session were encapsulated in etiological statements, but tempting though it is to call them myths, the opening and closing formulas depict them as fiction, and the narrator and audience did not take them as true. The opening formula, "The story is not meant to be believed," and the response, "It is meant to be kept and passed on," had been used at the beginning of the session, and narrators did not feel bound to repeat them.

Mr. Owusu began his story with an etiological statement (the play frame had earlier been set): "I am going to relate to you how it came about that

the crab is so fatty in its shell." This promise of an etiological account, following "How divorce came to Ghana," signaled the type of discourse: an exchange of etiological accounts, relying on "third person experiences" to discuss the sources of cultural phenomena. Mr. Owusu's "eye-witness" account was appropriate, for it thematically suited the etiology-oriented discourse. Just as in personal narratives, the story had been selected from among a good number in the narrator's repertoire.

The pitch used in the narration was that of ordinary discourse, but it had greater intensity, and fluctuated in dialogue situations to suit specific dramatic demands. The narrator assumed six different voices to depict the little girl, the old lady, Fish, Shrimp, Crab, or narrator, in order to project the event as a living experience. Even though he had the alternative of using reported speech for dialogues, he exercised the dramatic option of directly quoting speech of the characters throughout the performance.

The narrator was not stationary either. He moved from side to side, back and forth, coupling the iconicity of direct speech with the illusion of ostension. The narrator "prepared" food whenever the little girl was cooking in the story; as the crab bit the little girl's hand to remind her of the Old Lady's name, the narrator pinched his own left hand with the right, and grimaced. But perhaps the most dramatic aspects of the performance were situations where the narrator simulated the old lady's flight into space, and her downward dash to snatch the little girl's food. In reproducing such scenes, the narrator would jump up very high in simulation. But, of course, the ostension is only partially fulfilled, for the scooping up of the meal with the old lady's behind--an almost impossible act within the realm of reality--was not replicated. The narrator landed on his feet after each jump. Virtual ostension in narrative is only a sketchy representation of the experiential substrate partly because of the limitations of narration, but also because apparently fantastic feats do not allow for complete replication whether the experience related is actual or imagined (McDowell 1982). The audience here loses

in a sense, but the loss is a dramatic gain, for the inadequacy of the ostension deepens the aura surrounding the experience, making the "eye-witness" narrator more and more important for he still holds visual monopoly over the original event (within the frame of play). It is this visual monopoly that allowed the narrator in our tale to hold the tip of his finger to recapture in superlative terms the extremely tiny plantain the old lady gave to the cook.

Mr. Owusu recaptured the experience vividly through the use of ideophones, giving an added iconic dimension to the tale-performing event. Thus the old lady's dash to swiftly snatch the small girl's food is ideophonically depicted in a variety of sound sequences. There are three food-snatching incidents in the story, each of which has two or three component units. The resulting sounds in the first incident are expressed as **paya** and **hwam**; in the second as **hwom**, **hwam**, and **hwerere**; in the third as **hwererere** and **hwam**. Significantly, while the swiftness of snatching the solid food is depicted in one or two syllables (**hwom**, **hwam**, or **paya**), whenever the object of snatching was soup, the sound was depicted in more than two syllables--**hwererere**. Since soup is liquid and not coherent, a disyllabic ideophone would be inadequate to express the long time it took to disappear. It is not accidental that this word contains liquid sounds, and does not have an arresting consonant to denote abruptness, but is freely reduplicated to denote continuity and fluidity.

The food-snatching episodes and the songs provide the key to the rhythmic pattern of this narrative. The whole narrative lasted 7 minutes 20 seconds. The food-snatching episodes occurred in the first half of the narrative; each lasted 15 seconds, the first beginning on the 90th second of the narrative, the second on the 135th second, and the last on the 220th second. All the songs occurred from the fourth minute to the end of the tale.

While the verses of the songs punctuated the second part of the narrative with poetic rhythm and imagery, the food-snatching episodes provided the rhythmic balance in the first part. These episodes are all dramatised in syntactically parallel lines. See for instance the parallelism

in episode 2:

And she went high up and dashed for the food (the resulting sound was)--**hwom!**

And she flew high up and snatched the soup (the resulting sound was)--**hwerere!**

And she went high up and picked up the meat (the resulting sound was)--**hwam!**

These syntactically and semantically parallel lines provide the first part of the narrative with a strong sense of poetic rhythm. But the pattern changes in the second part; here the poetic patterning has its source in the songs which the audience joins in performing.

The food-grabbing episodes were enacted with audience co-operation. Of seven occurrences of the snatching ideophones or phonosthaetic words, the audience joined in articulating six. The participation was made possible by the narrator, who had set the pattern in the very first example by jumping high up and landing, articulating an appropriate ideophone. This episode, the most dramatic scene in the story, became a predictable pattern and awakened an attitude of collaborative expectancy in the audience. Thus not only were the six occasions of ideophone use enacted in unison by performer and audience, but often the audience created their own ideophones, in the process completely ignoring the narrator's descriptive icon.

The efficacy of the narrator's ideophonic description of the food-snatching episodes is evident if one juxtaposes them with a summary of the same episodes by the small girl when she was speaking to Crab. This is not the narrator's style of description, but that of the small girl herself. She tells Crab, "A certain old woman I am staying with, whenever I cook---she flies up and dashes to eat all the food." These words, put in the mouth of a small girl, contrast with the narrator's own account of the incident which is replete with ideophones and high energy drama. The small girl and the narrator have different rhetorical motives: she relates the event to Crab to solicit his sympathy, while the narrator is describing the incident vividly to his audience seeks to reinforce his position as an "eyewitness." The girl is interested in the content of the episode, while the narrator's credibility is at stake.



Other ideophones used in the story are **dwee**, denoting the sharp bite of the crab, **kru**, the sound produced when the old lady hit the crab with a stick, and **tam**, the sound of the old lady's mucus as it landed in the crab's shell. But perhaps the most interesting use of the ideophone is in the opening paragraph as the narrator vividly expresses the disease that killed the mother of the little girl. Expressing the affliction metaphorically, the narrator depicts it as a big stick striking the victim, rendering the resulting sound as **puu**, denoting a forceful heavy impact. As an "eyewitness" to the original event, the narrator is bound to resort to all relevant dramatic and literary devices to let the audience "see" the experience he "witnessed."

There were other ways by which the audience connived with the narrator to lend realism to the related experience. The audience sometimes interrupted the performance with requests for clarification. "Is it the old lady's bottom that snatches the food?" a member of the audience asked after the first food-snatching episode had been related. The narrator responded affirmatively. Another question was, "Did she take all the food?" When the narrator mentioned the old lady's name as **Akofosombo**, a listener asked for a repetition of the name. Finally, when the narrator used an expression to indicate that he forgot an incident, and inserted the incident in the story, this was met by the retort, "Speak well; for we are not making earthenware pots here" (in other words, "be serious in your narration and don't leave out essential episodes"; this event is not as easy as making earthenware pots, which is your profession).

This parodying of truth is also evident in Egyptian folktale performances. Narrators often end fantasy tales with the statement, "I was there and I just returned" (El-Shamy 1980). Folktales are fictitious, but the advantage in acknowledging the simulation of the true experience narrative is that it helps explain the aesthetic tension between fantasy and reality in tale performances. It helps to account for narrators' omitting the sources of tale traditions during performances (this would upset the play pattern) and it also helps explain the high drama-

tic investments that the artist makes in the performance. Sandra Stahl has argued for the recognition of the personal experience narrative as part of the story telling tradition. This should, however, not preclude the possibility that the folktale is a form of personal experience in which truth is simulated for dramatic effects. In both cases, it may be said, "the telling is the thing."